SPECIAL FEATURE NO. 3-1485 APRIL 14, 1978
CHRIS KERN

A LEXICOGRAPHICAL SESQUICENTENNIAL

ANNCR:

IT WAS JUST 150 YEARS AGO THAT NOAH WEBSTER PUBLISHED THE FIRST DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN ENGLISH, AND CHRIS KERN HAS SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE ANNIVERSARY.

VOICE:

BACK IN 1828, WHEN NOAH WEBSTER PUBLISHED HIS "AMERICAN DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE," THERE WERE PLENTY OF PEOPLE WHO THOUGHT THE TITLE CONTRADICTED ITSELF. WEBSTER'S ENGLISH CRITICS FELT THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN ON THE WESTERN SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC BORE LITTLE RELATION TO WHAT THEY SPOKE ON THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE OCEAN. AMERICAN, THEY SAID, WAS A CORRUPT AND DEGENERATE DIALECT -- MORE THE PRODUCT OF THE WILDERNESS WHERE IT WAS SPOKEN THAN THE CIVILIZATION THAT IT CAME FROM.

WEBSTER WAS RELATIVELY IMMUNE TO THE CRITICISM. "AMERICA," HE SAID, "MUST BE AS INDEPENDENT IN LITERATURE AS SHE IS IN POLITICS." LANGUAGE, HE BELIEVED, SHOULD BE DESCRIBED BY DICTIONARIES, NOT PRESCRIBED BY IT. IT WAS ABSURD, HE FELT, TO CRITICIZE A DICTIONARY FOR ACCURATELY DESCRIBING THE WORDS THAT PEOPLE ACTUALLY SAID. HAVING SAID THAT, HE CRITICIZED THE GREATEST OF HIS PREDECESSORS -- ENGLISHMAN SAMUEL JOHNSON -- FOR INCLUDING IN HIS DICTIONARY WORDS THAT WEREN'T REALLY ENGLISH.

JOHNSON HAD DEFINED "LEXICOGRAPHER" IN HIS DICTIONARY AS "A HARMLESS DRUDGE." TO ILLUSTRATE THE WORD "DULL," HE GAVE THIS EXAMPLE: "TO MAKE DICTIONARIES IS DULL WORK." MAYBE THAT'S THE REAL REASON WEBSTER DIDN'T LIKE HIM. HE KNEW THE MAKING OF DICTIONARIES WAS SERIOUS BUSINESS. "LANGUAGE," HE DECLAIMED, "WAS THE IMMEDIATE GIFT OF GOD."

BUT, OF COURSE, IT COMES OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF MEN. THOMAS HOBBES SAID: "WORDS ARE WISE MEN'S COUNTERS, THEY DO BUT RECKON BY THEM; BUT THEY ARE THE MONEY OF FOOLS." ABRAHAM LINCOLN ONCE SAID ABOUT A FELLOW LAWYER: "HE CAN COMPRESS THE MOST WORDS INTO THE SMALLEST IDEAS OF ANY MAN I EVER MET." SHAKESPEARE WARNED US OF "THIS HELPLESS SMOKE OF WORDS." OR, AS BENJAMIN FRANKLIN PUT IT, "WELL DONE IS BETTER THAN WELL SAID."

WELL SAID.

THEY SAY ENGLISH IS WELL ON ITS WAY TO BECOMING THE FIRST WORLD LANGUAGE, AMERICAN ENGLISH, AT THAT. IF THAT'S TRUE, NOAH WEBSTER DESERVES PART OF THE CREDIT. HE WAS THE FIRST TO PROVE TO A SKEPTICAL WORLD THAT THERE WAS A LANGUAGE CALLED AMERICAN ENGLISH -- OR, RATHER, THAT THE LANGUAGE THEY SPOKE IN AMERICA WAS ENGLISH.

"ZOUNDS," SAYS SHAKESPEARE, "I WAS NEVER SO BETHUMP'D BY WORDS." WELL, THIS PIECE IS FINISHED NOW, AND IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO BE BETHUMP'D BY SOMEONE ELSE.

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BML/RTD